

The Real Watergate

By Tom Wicker

Before a North Vietnamese invasion toppled the cruel Cambodian regime of Pol Pot, that regime had established itself as one of the most ruthless in history. And there was a rising chorus in this country to suggest that those who had opposed the war in Indochina were not only blind to the atrocities in Cambodia but responsible for them.

This inversion of history developed mostly from the fact that doves in and out of Congress opposed the Ford Administration's final request for \$222 million in military aid to the Lon Nol Government then on its last legs in Phnom Penh. Soon after that request was defeated, Cambodia fell to the Khmer Rouge and the nightmare of the Pol Pot regime began.

If that \$222 million could have prevented such a result, there might be some justice in the charges against those who opposed it. But reports from Cambodia made it clear that nothing could save the weak Lon Nol regime; briefly propping it up would only have prolonged to no good effect an exceptionally bloody and destructive war. Even the Ford Administration wanted the \$222 million not in the realistic belief that it would prevent Lon Nol's defeat but — as Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger told me at the time — to avoid the appearance of having abandoned an ally.

Now a strongly researched new book confirms that the Americans most directly responsible for the terrible fate of Cambodia were not doves but Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. They not only conceived the policy that spread the war across Cambodia; they carried it out in secrecy, with equal disregard for the Cambodian people and for American constitutional processes.

The tale is a squalid one. William Shawcross, the young British journalist who worked for four years on his book, "Sideshow" (New York: Simon and Schuster), says Cambodia "was not a mistake; it was a crime." And Michael Walzer of Harvard has suggested in a review for The New Republic that Cambodia was "the real Watergate" — not just because Mr. Kissinger as well as Mr. Nixon were implicated, but because their Cambodian venture represented a more serious perversion of democratic and constitutional processes than any of the impeachment charges formally recommended against Mr. Nixon.

In a horrendous first chapter, Mr. Shawcross details how the military, on direct orders from the White House, falsified records to conceal the bombing of Cambodia, without notification or authorization from Congress. "General [Earl] Wheeler [then chairman of the

Joint Chiefs of Staff] recalled that the President said — 'not just once, but either to me or in my presence at least half a dozen times' — that nothing whatsoever about the proposal [for the bombing] must ever be disclosed."

The bombing might have been justified, in the narrowest sense, by the undeniable presence of North Vietnamese forces in Cambodia's eastern border regions, in violation of its supposed neutrality. The bombing was not justified, however, by its ineffective military results, or by the death and destruction it brought to the Cambodian peasantry; in fact, it succeeded only in driving the North Vietnamese further into Cambodia.

That, too, was the major consequence of the American-South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1970 — which, again, had no Congressional authorization, not even much support within the Nixon Administration. "Let's go blow the hell out of them," Mr. Nixon at one point shouted to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but what mainly happened was that the North Vietnamese were pushed even farther west, into more populous areas and the rice fields around the Mekong River.

The forces of Lon Nol, who had by then overthrown Prince Norodom Sihanouk (without, Mr. Shawcross reports, help or encouragement from the C.I.A.), could not defend the country even with substantial American military aid. Worse, as the war spread into Cambodia's heart, American bombers followed, plastering the once peaceful countryside, villages and towns with explosives. Worse still, the Khmer Rouge — in Sihanouk's day a negligible opposition force — began to gain thousands of recruits and the support of the North Vietnamese forces.

Five years later to the month, the Hanoi-backed Khmer Rouge seized Phnom Penh from the remnants of the Lon Nol regime. After Mr. Nixon's bellicosity spread the war far into Cambodia, that outcome could never have been prevented by any American aid short of the kind that sent 500,000 troops to South Vietnam. The country was devastated, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians died and, with tragic inevitability, Pol Pot came to power.

Throughout, Henry Kissinger helped Mr. Nixon devise, then loyally supported this catastrophic — often mindless — policy. Mr. Shawcross even makes a convincing case that it was by doing so that Mr. Kissinger triumphed over Secretary of State William P. Rogers and underwrote his own future — but surely not, as "Sideshow" may help to insure, in any other, ever again.